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The Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) Programme in the UK

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INTRODUCTION

My concerns about SEAL, whilst emanating from conceptual and theoretical questions, necessarily engage with the practical. Whilst I am not a teacher at present, and have never taught the SEAL programme, I have some 15 years of primary school teaching experience and feel in a secure position to make the judgements that I do. The main emphasis in this account will be to present a sufficient description of SEAL and its theoretical underpinning (drawing on the work of Daniel Goleman) to be able to engage with questions around the emphasis that it places on skills as one angle of criticism. As a result of some of the questions and comments raised by the respondents that extended the discussion beyond the focus on skills I have extended my concluding remarks to introduce some of the other potential directions that this debate lends itself to.

First, by way of a gentle introduction, I invite you to accompany me on an imaginary visit to a school...

A SCHOOL VISIT

Imagine that you have been invited to visit a primary school in England one day in November 2009 (and imagine too, for the purposes of this, that you are able to wander freely around the school for the day). As you approach the entrance through the playground you pass a brightly coloured seat under a tree with the words 'Friendship bench' painted along the back of it.

You enter the main reception area and notice several big displays one of which presents the 'Value of the week'; this week's is 'sharing'. Further along the corridor you notice several displays around the theme of friendship. The first is entitled 'What makes a good friend' and is constructed as a wall made from paper bricks with comments from individual children saying what they believe makes a good friend. One brick states 'letting me use her pencils'; another 'playing with me in the playground'. The next display is 'Rules for breaking friends kindly'. There are sixteen bulleted points in total some of which are; don't be rude, do show you care, don't say I don't like you, be honest and make it short but effective.

You pass a Year 3 classroom (age 8) and the attendance register is being taken. There is a quiet atmosphere in the room and a suggestion that this is a regular activity. The children are sitting on the carpet and as each child responds to their name they add a statement of how they are feeling today. Harry is feeling angry and Tariq is feeling sad. As they tell the rest of the class, they quietly tiptoe to the wall and take a

peg with their name on it from a piece of string hung like a washing line and peg their name to one of a number of big flowers that make up a display entitled 'How do you feel today?' There is a choice of excited, nervous, angry, happy and sad.

Next you follow this class to the hall for assembly where they join the other Year 3 class and two Year 4 classes. A song called 'You got a friend' is playing as the children walk in and sit down. The teacher leading the assembly explains that the theme of this assembly is about friendship and the story they are going to hear is about friendship tokens. Friendship tokens, she says, are like magic: the more you give them away, the more you have. After the story she asks the children to think about a friendship token they have given someone recently. She then tells them that some of the work they will be doing over the next few weeks will be to help them get along with people and learn how to make things better when they fall out. She asks everybody in the hall (including teachers) to give a friendship token to the person next to them; then, whilst lighting a candle, asks everyone to find a quiet place inside them for personal reflection. After a minute or two the music is played again and the children are asked to leave quietly keeping these positive thoughts in their heads.

Later on in the day you pop into both of the Year 4 classes and, just as the teacher had said, they are doing activities related to the earlier assembly. One class is doing 'Circle Time' and passing a golden star from one person to the next as each person completes the sentences 'When I help other people I feel ...'. The other class are being reminded about previous work they had done on anger. They are then asked to remember a time when they were the most angry they have ever been (when they 'lost it'). This is then discussed in pairs with key questions structuring the discussion: How did it feel? , What words could you use to describe the anger? What is the best thing for you to do if you do 'lose it'? Reference is then made to the 'Calming down strategies' poster on the wall which suggests counting backwards from 10/20/100 or telling yourself you can 'handle this' or giving your 'thinking brain' time.

Before you leave the school you attend some of the staff meeting which is discussing the forthcoming Anti-Bullying week later in November. The staff are undergoing some training in the form of a small group quiz to highlight the characteristics of bullying and the meeting finishes with the planning of a Parents Meeting on the same theme.

It is likely that, as you leave the school, you reflect on what you have noticed throughout the day. Perhaps you conclude that the school has an obvious concern for the well-being of its pupils. Undoubtedly you will consider the explicit nature of the current attention to friendships. Of course without knowing more about the school and perhaps having the opportunity to talk to the teachers you cannot know the rationale behind the decisions that planned such activities.

SEAL DESCRIPTION

In fact such a school in 2009 would appear to be a model example of one implementing SEAL. Broadly speaking SEAL is a comprehensive, whole-school approach to promoting and teaching social and emotional skills. It was introduced in primary schools in 2005, in secondary schools in 2007 and is currently being introduced in Early Years settings (SEAD—Social and Emotional Aspects of Development) and, whilst being heavily funded and widely promoted, is not yet statutory.

The programme identifies what social and emotional aspects of learning are, why they are important, gives ideas and resources to deliver the effective teaching of them and suggests specific steps in how to make this a successful initiative. The social and emotional *aspects* that the programme identifies are considered to be the underpinning qualities and skills that help us manage life and learning effectively. The five aspects of *self-awareness*, *managing feelings*, *motivation*, *empathy* and *social skills* cover the two broad areas of the personal (the first three) and the inter-personal. Within each of these aspects there are a number of individual skills which can be categorised in an age-related developmental model. For example in the *managing feelings* aspect of learning, an early skill would be to be able to recognise and label a feeling and to be able to share it with another person, and a later skill would be to be able to use self-distraction or self-calming strategies in order to reduce its intensity.

Individual skills within each aspect take the form of 'I can' statements and represent the range of knowledge, skills and understanding (learning outcomes) that a child might demonstrate. All together, it proposes, there are forty-two skills at primary level (DfES, 2005) and fifty at secondary level (DfES, 2007). It is considered, according to the documentation, that such skills underlie almost every area of our lives and at school they underpin effective learning, positive behaviour, regular attendance and emotional well-being. More generally they influence our capacity to be respectful citizens, to be healthier and to be a good employee. Together they are therefore fundamental to school improvement and for society as a whole.

Where children have good skills in these areas, and are educated within an environment supportive to emotional health and well-being, they will be motivated to, and equipped to:

- be effective and successful learners;
- make and sustain friendships;
- deal with and resolve conflict effectively and fairly;
- solve problems with others or by themselves;
- manage strong feelings such as frustration, anger and anxiety;
- be able to promote calm and optimistic states that promote the achievement of goals;
- recover from setbacks and persist in the face of difficulties;
- work and play cooperatively;
- compete fairly and win and lose with dignity and respect for competitors;
- recognise and stand up for their rights and the rights of others;
- understand and value the differences and commonalities between people, respecting the right of others to have beliefs and values different from their own (DfES, 2005, p. 7).

There is an acknowledgement in the programme that, as most social, emotional and behavioural skills change over time, the concepts, understanding and skills need to be revisited at regular intervals in order to build on what has been learned previously. Consequently the bulk of the programme, guidance and documentation consist of a detailed resource pack presented as a spiral curriculum ensuring that the five sets of skills are visited at regular points throughout the school life of a child. This is achieved through a set of suggested assemblies and activities (together with supporting worksheets, stories and posters) that enable the learning outcomes to cover

the forty two/fifty identified skills referred to before. The resources for primary schools are structured into seven 'themes' (each approximately six weeks).

1. *New Beginnings* (September/October)
2. *Getting on and falling out* (November/December)
3. *Say no to Bullying* (November for two weeks)
4. *Going for Goals!* (January/February)
5. *Good to be me* (February/March)
6. *Relationships* (March/April)
7. *Changes* (June/July).

The resources for Secondary schools are organised into 3 themes:

1. Learning to be together - social skills and empathy
2. Keep on learning – motivation
3. Learning about me – managing feelings

There is clear guidance on the specific steps to making SEAL a success in any school. Primarily it must be a whole school initiative and it is essential that all staff are suitably trained. Ideally they have taken part in an assessment of their own social and emotional skills (and identified those they need to develop further) as they should be able to model them. This is true of all teaching, the guidance states, but crucial when coaching and demonstrating skills in this sensitive area.

There is an acknowledgement that there are more discrete opportunities for covering the SEAL content; for example through *subjects* such as PHSEE, Drama, English or through teaching and learning *approaches* such as communities of learning, Assessment for Learning, circle time, group challenges and critical thinking. On a broader level the overall ethos of the school will have an obvious impact on the success of SEAL as it will indicate, for example, the level of emotional safety there is to make mistakes when learning and the extent to which pupils are listened to and their opinions are valued.

In recalling the imaginary school visit described before it is possible to consider why it might be one implementing SEAL. It is November, hence the *Getting on and falling out* theme and the staff preparation for *National Anti-Bullying week*. The displays, the activities and the assembly content, including the music, are in fact all suggestions from the SEAL resource. Some of the 'discrete' practices (register taking, finding a place inside for reflection, friendship bench) are complementary to the ethos that is implied in making SEAL a success. Whilst this example does not necessarily give a rich flavour of the quality of the relationships within the school and what it is to experience being a pupil or teacher there (arguably the most important detail) it would seem, on the face of it that implementing a programme with such positive aspirations is a thing to be commended.

UNDERPINNING THEORY

As with much contemporary educational literature, the official SEAL documentation has a very pragmatic style favouring a minimal theoretical exposition and a brief, where possible bulleted, list of essential information aiming at allowing teachers to

grasp what is needed in a time-efficient manner. The guidance does however place the programme within a specific rationale by stating that in the last decade 'work has developed at an extraordinary pace, in psychology, neuroscience, education and other disciplines' seemingly indicating an inherent link between these areas and apparently using this as a reassuring validation of its merit.

This work has demonstrated, from a variety of perspectives that social and emotional skills are at the heart of positive human development, effective social groups and societies, and effective education (DfES, 2007, p. 8).

The stimulus for SEAL was the 'growing evidence base from the US on the impact of social and emotional learning (SEL) on a range of areas including school achievement' (DfES, 2006, p. 1) which showed that work on emotional and social competence and well-being has a 'wide range of educational and social benefits, including greater educational and work success, improved behaviour, increased inclusion, improved learning, greater social cohesion, increased social capital, and improvements to mental health' (Weare & Gray, 2003, p. 6). The core principles and content of SEAL are based on the principles of these 'effective programmes' and the work of Daniel Goleman (particularly his work on emotional intelligence) is considered a seminal work in this area and highly influential in the broader 'new psychology' movement in which they are grounded.¹

The work of Goleman is well known mainly due to the international best-selling book *Emotional Intelligence* (1995) and the influence of his work on SEAL cannot be emphasised enough. Whilst there is insufficient time to explain it in the depth it warrants it is worth highlighting some key points. Importantly the term Emotional Intelligence, whilst now conceived as being essentially educational, in fact it has its origins in psychology. The educational emphasis was partly born out of Goleman's vision of schools being the most appropriate place to deliver widespread social and emotional teaching.

His main aim is to understand what it means to, and how to, bring intelligence to emotion in an attempt to redress an imbalance that favours the rational over the emotional in the intelligence stakes. He concludes that there are two 'minds'; one that thinks (the rational mind or the head) and one that feels (the emotional mind or the heart); both are ways of knowing, one conscious and the other intuitive, that combine to give us our mental life (this is presumably his definition of the mind although he does not clearly introduce the concept). This expanded model of what it is to be 'intelligent' puts emotions at the centre of 'aptitudes for living' and, just as being very intellectually able brings success in academic attainment, so being very emotionally able brings benefits in all areas of life (including academic attainment). This is why EI is so important it is claimed; it affects our relationships, our careers, our physical health and overall well-being.

Goleman's definition of EI is divided into five domains (corresponding to the five aspects in SEAL) each of which has associated skills (Goleman, 1995, p. 43).

1. *Knowing/recognising one's emotions.* Self-awareness—recognising a feeling as it happens—is the keystone of emotional intelligence.

2. *Managing emotions.* Handling feelings so they are appropriate is an ability that builds on self-awareness.
3. *Motivating oneself.* Marshalling emotions in the service of a goal is essential for paying attention, for self-motivation and mastery and for creativity.
4. *Recognising emotions in others.* Empathy, another ability that builds on emotional self-awareness, is the fundamental 'people skill'.
5. *Handling relationships.* The art of relationships is, in a large part, skill in managing emotions in others.

To this definition he adds a perspective that moves it beyond a psychological paradigm, in which the above definition sits very comfortably, into a more ethical territory that he alludes to in the preface of the book (entitled *Aristotle's Challenge*) where he states that there is a 'pressing moral imperative' to attend to in modern times; we must highlight the importance of EI as 'the link between sentiment, character, and moral instincts' and respond to the 'growing evidence that fundamental ethical stances in life stem from underlying emotional capacities' (xii). He suggests that 'those who are at the mercy of impulse—who lack self control—suffer a moral deficiency' and that the 'ability to control impulse is at the base of will and character' (*ibid.*).

So it seems that, for Goleman, scientific advances have not only illuminated the relationship of the brain, neurology and the emotions but it has simultaneously suggested a new grounding and explanation of moral behaviour. He proposes that the explicit teaching of the skills and competences of the emotions is a necessary step for the future and the most obvious institution to be responsible for the delivery of this is the school. The advantage of a universal programme implemented through the school curriculum is that it can incorporate all that we now know about interlinked developmental stages in children's physical, cognitive and emotional development and therefore carefully plan appropriate learning for each stage of the unfolding EI.

CONCERNS

My concerns about SEAL are many but I wish to specifically stay with the work of Goleman and consider further the emphasis on skills that is at the heart of his work and, as already stated, that of SEAL.

So Goleman considers emotional well-being as primarily relating to a brain state that can be identified and measured and is subject to being influenced by a range of internal and external factors that make up our human lives. By establishing these causal relationships it is possible, he asserts, to identify variables that represent the factors that make our lives positive. In this way strategies can be employed and skills can be learned that influence the level of our emotional well-being for the better; and these too can be measured—for how else would we know that they had improved?

This technical and empirical model has some implicit assumptions. First that what is being measured defines emotional well-being. Second is that the measuring tools (the self-reporting and the techniques used in brain science) are reliable. Furthermore the conceiving of all abilities and capacities as skills is crucial in this process. Once they can be accounted for in this manner they can then be subject to the empirical

measurement that is used in defining the deficit levels of well-being in the first place. When applied to the SEAL programme it is easy to see how, for example, that a child lacking in empathy skills (through a self-reporting quiz) can be perceived as having improved in this personal skill as a result of engaging in class activities (followed perhaps by another form of self-reporting). But this begs the question of whether this is a skill in the first place.

SKILLS OR ATTRIBUTES?

Whilst it seems quite sensible to assume that people can get better (or worse) at doing things it is questionable whether this is entirely down to *skill*. Blake, Smeyers, Smith and Standish (2000) illustrate this adeptly when they ask whether a good parent child relationship is most significantly to be understood in terms of the adult possessing certain *skills* that they practise on their child or whether the term is used in this situation as a convenient noun to describe things that we can be better or worse at and learn to improve at. The same could be said about the relationship between the teacher and the pupil; whilst much of the role can be attributed to skills and competence it is questionable whether it all can be reduced to this level despite its convenience for evaluation purposes.

This conflict and uncertainty regarding terminology and meaning is evident in the interchangeable use of terms by Goleman. In one particular paragraph he uses *ability*, *traits*, *character*, *competencies*, *aptitude* and *skill* in reference to EI. Elsewhere he uses *capacity*, *capability* and *quality*. The conflation of these terms belies the differences between a *quality* or a *trait* and a *skill* or *competence*. Take for example my observations as a teacher of young children who I would describe as sociable or *friendly*. Kim, for example, who was generally and consistently friendly; to know that she was friendly, was to know something about her personality. The word described her. This is different from having skills or competences in friendship although it is true that these can be identified and applied; so to know that being friendly involves, for example, initiating conversation, sharing your toys, playing together, listening and giving complements can lead to the acquisition of these skills. So for Alex, who had attended a self-esteem group due to her lack of social integration, the conscious use of these friendship skills resulted in varying levels of success. On the one hand she was perplexed as to why the sharing of her pencils did not lead to her being invited to Tariq's birthday party but conversely pleased that asking Kim if she could sit with her at playtime had been received with a welcoming yes. (One suspects that Kim was not conscious that she was being friendly or skilful in this instance).

Of course both Kim and Alex possessed personal *skills* as well. Kim was very good at problem solving and Alex was well organised. Whilst those skills might be reflective of type of person that they were the skills take on their meaning in the context that they are applied. So to imagine friendly Kim utilising her skill of problem solving recalls memories of lively group work whilst for Alex her well-organised skill was reflected in her neat and tidy tray. The same skills acquired by the other may manifest in different ways, for example Alex's skill of problem solving may be evident in her success at maths puzzles. In this sense they are distinguishable from qualities as on their own they offer a partial sense of who someone is.

The reduction of all human qualities and capacities to skills and the corresponding emphasis on self-conscious awareness lends itself to a feeling of completeness and

manageability of the whole educational process. Whether it is a teacher, a pupil or governor there is a sense that you need to be *aware* of what you *are* able to do or know and increasingly of what you *are not* able to do or know before you can manage it.² The fact that there has been little objection to the design and pedagogy of the project (objections have been more to do with workload and curriculum time) has everything to do with dominant technical paradigm of current UK education.

The use of a universal programme such as SEAL has laudable aims of increasing well-being; how could schools not be concerned with this?³ But by accounting for these human experiences narrowly in terms of skills and considering this as a project of the management of the mind has led to the assumption that self-conscious awareness is a sufficient and reliable process in achieving this, that it is needed by all children and that there is developmental staged model of social and emotional progress which provides the scaffolding on which the activities can be hung. This is not to propose that certain techniques and strategies are wrong in themselves, even in an educational context, or to suggest that curriculum considerations in this area should be eliminated, but more to be wary about importing them wholesale as a goal for every child.

All three respondents raised issues that I had not covered in my initial presentation due to the limitations of time but are worthy of a brief inclusion here (all of which I agree with).

The first has to do with questioning the fear that rich social and emotional aspects of ourselves (and of learning) would become prescriptive and concepts such as empathy would become rarefied. It was suggested that this will not necessarily occur as a result of a programme such as SEAL. It is heartening to say that I agree with this statement and this has everything to do, in my opinion, with the relative strength of the complex reality that underlies the attempt to unify and simplify what occurs in our social and emotional lives. However to raise awareness of this with the people who are implementing such programmes can only be a positive thing.

The example was given of students suffering from depression, bullying or grieving who, far from being helped by being encouraged to confront these emotional states, may in fact end up feeling worse. This is a point raised by one of the critics of SEAL, Carol Craig (2007; 2009), who suggests that if children continue to experience negative emotions despite their best attempts to manage them this could inadvertently lead to an elevation of negative emotions.

The third issue that was raised in response to the initial paper was in relation to freedom in the context of the teaching of social and emotional aspects of learning and how this relates to the curriculum and the ethos of learning prevalent in the schooling system. This potentially enormous debate raises significant questions that directly relate to SEAL not least around the language of choice that is frequently used in the suggested resources and how this may not look so liberating when considered to be embedded in a particular value system. Whilst it may be argued that it is impossible to have any compulsory education outside of a value system, it is plausible to consider that repeatedly questioning the values underpinning any universal programme is to enhance the freedom of both the teachers and learners; and this seems particularly relevant when considering social and emotional learning.

NOTES

- 1 Yuki Ohara was interested in the comparative differences between the SEL programmes in the US and SEAL in the UK. I wish to emphasise that I do not have extensive knowledge about the SEL programmes or indeed the success of the SEL movement in the US. Reference to them is often made in the context of the self-esteem movement which directly relates to a psychological territory that I did not wish to engage with extensively. However the programmes that Weare and Gray refer to when advocating the success of SEL were not limited to US *school* contexts and so a direct comparison with a school-based programme such as SEAL in the UK would not be appropriate. Ohara's additional question related to whether there had been adaptations of US SEL programmes to the UK context in the designing of the SEAL programme. The SEAL website emphasises the importance of SEAL in complementing other government initiatives such as social inclusion as well as on-going school-based curriculum developments such as The Healthy School initiative and Every Child Matters and the established subjects already mentioned. So whilst the US programmes were a good model it is considered that SEAL is specifically fitting for contemporary UK policy.
- 2 In her response Ohara illustrated the potential positive aspect of this self-conscious awareness when she used examples from her teaching where students had reported enhanced relationships as a result of being taught how to recognise emotional states. This, together with Jade Nguyen's comment about the role that teachers play in assisting students to relate to themselves, highlights the potential positive role that SEAL could play in formulating aspects of a long-established aspect of classroom practice. My concerns are not so much in doubting the effectiveness of much of the content of the programme but more to do with its universal application, as is raised in the following paragraph.
- 3 All three respondents agreed with this.

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